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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: POLICE PRESSURE MOUNTS AS OLYMPIC TORCH RELAY NEARS

REF: HANOI 235

1. (SBU) Summary: Prime Minister Dung's public comments that the GVN will not tolerate disruptions of the April 29 Olympic torch relay in Ho Chi Minh City have been followed by what appears to be a very well-orchestrated police crack down against persons deemed likely to incite anti-China protests. Members of a local group known for its outspoken anti-China rhetoric report increased police attention, including "working sessions," and outright physical intimidation. One member has left the city. The group's leader, a prominent anti-China and pro-human rights blogger arrested last week (reftel), has now been charged with tax evasion. In spite of police pressure, the blog community continues to call for protests on April 29. End summary.

2. (SBU) Members of the Freelance Journalists Club led by Nguyen Van Hai (aka Hoang Hai or Dieu Cay), the blogger arrested last week (reftel), are receiving increased attention and intimidation from authorities in the run-up to the Beijing Olympic torch relay in HCMC on April 29. Several of Hai's associates report round-the-clock surveillance by an increasing number of plainclothes police who are being stationed near their homes and following them during their daily routines. Members of the club have also been summoned to multiple "working sessions" with the police in recent weeks.

3. (SBU) One prize-winning movie director who belongs to the club has left HCMC temporarily to avoid further police harassment. Another club member said plainclothes police confronted him when he was out with his girlfriend, pretended to be his girlfriend's "brothers" and threatened to beat him up. They also warned him "not to go anywhere" in public. Yet another club member said he was detained for "not carrying his ID" while he watched police carry out a search of Hai's home. According to other members and the club's website, this same individual has now been called up for mandatory military service, even though he is currently a university student. (Comment: Most university students studying their bachelors in Vietnam are exempt from military service. Viet Youth for Democracy Activist and blogger Nguyen Tien Trung was also called up for 18 months of military service in March, leading Post to believe that mandatory military service may be a new GVN tactic for taking young activists out of commission. End note.)

4. (SBU) Meanwhile, Cong An ("Police") newspaper reports that the club member arrested last weekend (reftel), Hoang Hai, is now being charged ... for tax evasion! The charges reportedly stem from an investigation that uncovered evidence that Hai dodged taxes on his HCMC residence in violation of Article 161 of the Vietnam Penal Code. Hai's associates confirmed to ConGen that he is now currently being held in HCMC's district 3 police detention facility.

5. (SBU) Despite this crackdown, which began on the heel's PM

Dung's public declaration that disruptions of the April 29 Olympic torch relay in HCMC would not be tolerated, the situation in HCMC remains quite unsettled. Anti-China sentiments fueled by the ongoing spat over the Spratly and Paracel islands as well as China's recent crackdown in Tibet remain hot button issues among Vietnamese youth. Reports and contacts here indicate that overseas Vietnamese students participated in anti-Beijing Olympic rallies in Europe during Olympic torch relay ceremonies there, and the domestic blog community continues to call for anti-China protests here on April 29.

FAIRFAX